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RESCUING PUBLICNESS FROM ORGANIZATION STUDIES

Jean-Claude THOENIG

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Is it still worth to study the public sector with organizational lenses? The real world keeps struggling with issues and demands that require the intervention of some sort of public action no market mechanism or charity initiative would be

able to achieve. And yet knowledge production about public set ups seems to have become rather poor these very last years.

Mainstream organization theories are not inspired or driven by public organization research as much as they are by other objects such as firms or economic regimes such as markets. Publications and colloquia suggest that most of the time public agencies are used as cases or empirical material for other purposes than the understanding of public organizations as such. They provide evidence to explore some broader facets of general organization theory. They may also feed knowledge and approaches covering rather specialized areas or narrow defined domains such as those dealing with health, police or social welfare.

The picture looks grim when public organizations are considered as a specific inquiry domain. To what extent are they organizational constructs and configurations of a special kind, that are different from other types of organizations, or not? Not much attention is allocated to public organizations as public.

While in the 1970s about half of the papers submitted to international conferences and colloquia specialized in organization studies such as EGOS specifically dealt with public sector organizations, they attracted only around five percent thirty years later. Pockets of sociological analysis still exist, but in specific areas and policy-centered domains such as police, health, military or education.

Academic labor markets have experienced a revolution. It may be estimated that in some European countries, and within about twenty years, the number of organizations study doctoral dissertations dealing with firms has increased by a factor of seven to eight. During the same period the number of theses covering public organizations at large has decreased. In a country like France, the number of doctoral students working on public management and policymaking has declined by more than half.

The reasons mentioned to explain such a lack of academic enthusiasm and creativity may be several.

One comment is often heard. Value added return would be stagnating when not declining about knowledge on public organizations. Their study would tend to replay again and again old tunes such as the bureaucratic paradigm. They also are blamed for supposedly delivering quite marginal discoveries. They even rediscover the wheel.

So-called paradigm life cycles and fads should also be blamed for. To make contributions to supposedly dominant or fashionable schools of thought such as network theory, agency theory or critical studies would make access to academic careers and publishing opportunities much easier than to specialize in public organizations.

Professional education institutions such as business schools have offered more and better job opportunities than sociology and political sciences departments. This has coincided with a time when humanities were facing a lasting identity crisis (Horowitz 1993) and a declining labor. With the exception of New Public Management related issues, research funding has also massively dropped in many countries, at least when compared with other topics.

Another line of argumentation refers to the degree of ignorance junior researchers as well as some of their teachers manifest about fundamentals in social sciences. Scientific lessons and work published before the 1980s are simply ignored, hindering cumulative progress and making debates or research agendas quite repetitive. Business school doctoral students and faculty often have quite weak or biased undergraduate exposure to the fundamentals of disciplines like sociology and political science. Either they have an engineering or law educational background or, when they had a major in economics, for instance, organization as a topic was restricted to an object to be studied by axiomatic approaches only.

The purpose of the paper is to argue that publicness still makes sense as an issue for further research investment;

Its first section shall question whether organizational knowledge provided by empirically grounded social sciences has really explored publicness in an exhaustive manner. It shall be argued that classic organizational sociology – defined by a standard theory or definition of its domain (Thoenig 1998) - has provided a breakthrough in many respects, as a *Verstehen* perspective, as a body of conceptual and methodological frameworks. At the same time it did not fully explore and address the agenda about public organizations as such.

How should publicness be handled as an issue? The perspective suggested in the second section assumes that public organizations are organizations of a specific nature. Compared with firms, churches or voluntary associations, they should be considered as different, not on a ordinal scale but in cardinal terms, at least on one key dimension. They are in charge of public policy effectiveness, of a production function that generates societal impacts. Such a research agenda, that finds inspiration in policy studies and suggests a theory of governmental agencies of its own, should eventually be empirically tested in a more systematic

way. A general idea underlying it is that, while large similarities may exist between public and non-public entities on some aspects of their organizational models, the function they are accountable for is quite specific from an action as well as from an order standpoint.

The third section shall present a few reasons and examples why policies, their making and their management, still offer a fruitful access to further empirical inquiry on public organizations. Knowledge gaps remain that should be of interest for political scientists, public administration and other related social science disciplines.

1. A still open agenda

Public sector organizations are human enterprises and social configurations committed to the provision of goods and services that are of public essence. They also are part of government at one level or another. The question may be raised whether public sector organizations define indeed a domain for organizational enquiry. In which ways are they unique and specific? Does publicness matter?

Publicness as defined by the formal status of the organization remains a questionable criterion. A variety of legal statuses and territorial areas handle public affairs in modern societies. Governments at various levels, from urban communes to the United Nations, rely on complex and highly differentiated sets of formal organizations they control (Thoenig 1997, figure 1, p. 42,). The separation line between public and private does not appear easy to draw descriptively.

The reference to law provides no solid ground for another reason. Civil service in the Common Law tradition as well as public administration in the Roman Law perspective do not control in a monopolistic way the handling of public affairs, from law and order, fire protection and environmental protection policies to education, land use and social welfare. Hybrid institutional designs and fuzzy legal statuses are common practice. Some public agencies operate openly in a market related manner. They face competition from private firms. The state acts as a profit-oriented owner. In several sectors governmental authorities consistently subcontract collective good mandates and allocate public funds to not for profit associations, the latter getting most of their budget from taxpayer money, not from charities or clients-users. Some non-governmental entities such as firms, associations or citizens play an important role in delivering collective goods, quite often without being formally mandated to do so. The state may be one decisive actor. Nevertheless it is far from having exclusive ownership and

control of public affairs, from the definition of the issues to be addressed to the design of actual solutions and their implementation.

When public sector organizations are treated as a special class or type, scholars quite often assume that their legal status, the fact that they report to some state or governmental authority, provides a sufficient criterion to postulate their uniqueness, without considering in depth the question of the specificity of such a status and its empirical manifestations. In a way they commit the same sin than old institutionalism. They ignore the massive knowledge contribution made by sociology of organizations.

Within half a century the scientific status of public sector in organizations studies has evolved in major ways. The 1960s settled a major debate. Old institutionalism inspired by formal-legal approaches such as public administration theory in North America and *science administrative* in Europe started to decline. Sociologists and political scientists relying on empirical observation and behavioral approaches took control. They suggested that publicness was not to be considered as a given or an axiom but as a problem for enquiry. They took the lead in generating knowledge.

Sociology of organizations also challenged Marxist inspired perspectives. Meso level phenomena such as organizations should not any longer be considered as mere superstructures. Class struggles and vested interest dynamics do not explain the whole story about how ministries and public agencies operate.

The paradox is that the end of the 20th century coincides with a spectacular change in the agenda, as if publicness as an issue had lost attraction. A broader picture suggests that sociology of organizations has indeed lost momentum. It has even been marginalized by other disciplines or paradigms.

An illustration is given by public management education. Public management as a specific domain had developed in the USA and in Europe in the early 1970s. It kept organizational issues at the top of priorities to be researched and managed. Leading figures like Aaron Wildavsky (1979), a political scientist by training, considered contributions made by sociologists such as Martin Landau (1969) as major sources for their own inspiration. Unfortunately, in the late 1980s, political and organizational *Verstehen* of public phenomena lost some ground. Competing disciplines came to the forefront that gave more visibility to normative perspectives. Policy analysis and policy design inspired by axiomatic approaches that blend microeconomics, agency theory and quantitative-only types of data took over. In some cases they forgot analysis underway and preached managerial recipes linked to ideologies such as rational choice.

Therefore one argument would be that sociology of public organizations has faced strong opposition. The field and the domain of publicness have been taken over by two alternative paradigms: perspectives inspired by market and firm references, new versions of old critical or even anti-positivist postures. While ideologically New Public Management and Postmodernism do not share much in common, both tend to question when not deny the specificity of public organizations as social constructs. The former argues that market principles and private firm type of management have to be used as benchmarks. The latter considers that the public sector is just one facet of a much broader trend or characteristic that is at work across societies such as undesirable organized principles and organizing processes oppressing contemporary mankind and enabling capitalism and globalization to rule the world. In some extreme versions, critical theories even argue that organizations are phenomena or artifacts that are illusions, not topics for knowledge.

Defined by Max Weber (1922) as a major step toward modernity and rationality in act, bureaucracy gradually became a scapegoat and a problem to fight. It is ironic to see that, more than sociologists, economists such as Edith Penrose (1959), Kenneth Arrow (1974) or Oliver Williamson (1975), to name a few, were pioneering in characterizing the properties of firms as a distinctive type of organization. Such contributions, the ways of reasoning and the pro-market flavor they promote, have influenced quite strongly public organization studies for the last part of the twentieth century. Rational Choice and Public Choice approaches define new frontiers about public sector enterprises. Efficiency is substituting legalism as source of legitimacy. Management, not administration, provides the reference for political regimes applied to the public sector. New Public Management, legitimated by international institutions such as the World Bank and the OECD, inspired many if not most public funding allocated to programs on administrative reform in the public sector.

Another version of the story would underline the ambiguous way sociologists of organizations themselves had dealt with publicness related matters. In fact all the promises have not been or could not be delivered. Various endogenous reasons may explain the relative decline of classic organizational sociology applied to governmental agencies.

A first reason is linked to the term of bureaucracy.

The founding father himself did not help when he published in the late 1920s his theory of bureaucracy as a formal organization. On one side it inspired an ambitious and fruitful research program that started in the early 1950s with contributions from pioneering figures such Robert Merton (1952), Robert Dahl

and Charles Lindblom (1953) and Peter Blau (1955). It lasted at least for twenty years.

On the other side it opened the door to an ambiguous positioning of the term of bureaucracy by organizational sociologists. Three meanings overlapped and still do: a descriptive and conceptual one that could apply to any organization, whatever its legal status would be, a way to call any agency controlled by the state, and a pejorative meaning linked to big government, red tape and frustrations of users. Despite attempts to avoid confusion made by authors like Victor Thompson (1961) - his distinction between bureaucracy as a formal model of organization, bureaupathology as exaggerated qualities such as resistance to change or ritualistic routines, and bureausis, a neologism defining the negative impacts induced among its clients by bureaucratization -, despite sharper and sharper analytical and conceptual frameworks defining the model and its latent functions by Robert Merton (1940) or Michel Crozier (1963), sociology of organizations was to some extent trapped by the polysemic status of a key term it was currently using.

The motivations that were driving the personal agenda of some scholars were close to the disappointment and the worries that had inspired Roberto Michels (1949) about the becoming of socialist parties and trade unions in European democracies in the early part of the 1900s. Trotskyist activism during their youth influenced political critiques of New Deal institutions by Philip Selznick (1949) or motivated Martin Lipset and his colleagues (1956) to understand why it was possible to avoid the iron law of oligarchy and to maintain a high level of democratic life to develop within a American trade union. From U.S. southern states libertarian to Eastern liberal backgrounds, the spectrum of sources of inspiration and social debate leading to organizational studies was quite wide. The economic crisis of the early 1930s followed by the management of the Second World War efforts and consequences had boosted the growth of government. Various models of Welfare State were starting to develop on both sides of the Atlantic Sea.

To some extent sociology of organizations studying governmental organizations, but also political parties and even firms, became perceived as focused too narrowly on field studies and model buildings that were bureaucratic and therefore pathological. Alternative solutions or better types were not spontaneously associated with its knowledge. This opened the way to other approaches or disciplines, considered as more in line with modernity.

A second reason is linked to postulates that have not been verified accurately. Such is typically the case with the existence of the differences, if any, between organization in the public sector and organization in other sectors.

A striking aspect of the program standard sociology of organizations has achieved is the relative incomplete or ambiguous answers it has provided to the problem. The specificity of each, if any, has been addressed in a rather shy way. One test is to go through handbooks and encyclopedia that have been published since the late 1950s (March and Simon 1958; March 1965). In quite many of them no chapter is specifically devoted to the issue. This reflects a broader phenomenon.

A widely shared opinion by organizational sociologists was that differences existed. Private firms are assumed to be less rigid and more able to listen to their environment. The reason is that they have to survive in competitive markets, while public agencies face less changing and unpredictable environments. Public agencies are postulated to be more efficient than private firms when economic and political development is required. Fred Riggs (1969), for instance, argued that developing countries need public sector to come to prominence because of a polity “unbalanced” between their strong political system and their weak public administration sphere.

Nevertheless comparisons have rather failed. They are not always based on technically solid ground. While some examples are quite disturbing, evidence shows in a consistent way that, for instance, the existence of a specific and strong form of administrative sector does not explain, all other things being equal, why development is or is not generated. Field surveys suggest ordinal differences on various parameters such as formal properties or modes of functioning of organizations according to the fact that they are profit oriented, not for profit or governmental. The problem is that quite many studies suggest that bureaucratization measured by the levels of formalization, centralization of authority and complexity in the division of tasks is in many cases quite strong in leading business firms and, comparatively, quite low in public agencies. State bureaucracies are not by nature prone to rigidities in the way they actually function, other types of organizations being less stalled as a matter of principle. Evidence as it can be synthesized does not go very far.

One point is striking about the interface between sociology of organizations and publicness. Knowledge produced by the discipline owes a lot to the study of public sector agencies. But publicness has not been its key concern as a social phenomenon.

In Europe and even more in the U.S.A., pioneering contributions by sociologists have studied public agencies as empirical tests for the validity of basic paradigms. Herbert Simon (1947) observes how city park managers decide about new projects. The doctrine of absolute rationality is fallacious when

considering human behaviors in organized settings. Philip Selznick (1949) shows how the Tennessee Valley Authority that had been founded by President Franklin Roosevelt is exposed to secondary institutionalization processes at the level of its grass roots units.

This tradition has made immense contributions to knowledge about organizations in general and firms in particular. Agencies operating in the public sector have provided breakthrough discoveries. Concepts such as cooptation, power and control, theories such as culturalism, functionalism and redundancy and overlap, have received wide attention from a second generation of scholars. Peter Blau (1955) studies two public welfare agencies and discovers a law: employment security and autonomy are conducive to a positive attitude toward change. Michel Crozier (1963) derives his explanation of the way national cultural norms embedded organizations from monographs on the French postal agency and the state owned manufacture of cigarettes. James March and Michael Cohen (1974) develop the garbage can model primarily from observations about how American universities are governed. The list seems endless of many of the prominent figures in the discipline from Amitai Etzioni (1961) and his discovery of the phenomenon of compliance to Charles Perrow and his social-structural approach (1970).

Most of the time, public organizations were treated as illustrations of a more general type of social configuration called organizations. Any organization, including the firm, is embedded by power dynamics and functions as a political arena made of strategic behaviors (March 1962). Neo-institutionalism (March and Olsen 1984) provides a convincing example. Today perspectives bringing the institutional phenomena back in are widely diffused in business schools and endorsed by many scholars when dealing with market and firm contexts. But several of the pioneers of what is sometimes labeled as American sociological institutionalism (Thoenig 2003) study phenomena like the diffusion of new patterns of organizational management across cities (Tolbert and Zucker 1983), sets of art museums (DiMaggio 1991) or elementary schools (Scott and Meyer 1994). Conformity and legitimacy imperatives explain why similar institutional forms diffuse across organizational fields. How far the public status makes or does not make a difference with firms or with not for profit statuses still remains an open research question (Thoenig 2004).

2. Publicness as a research problem

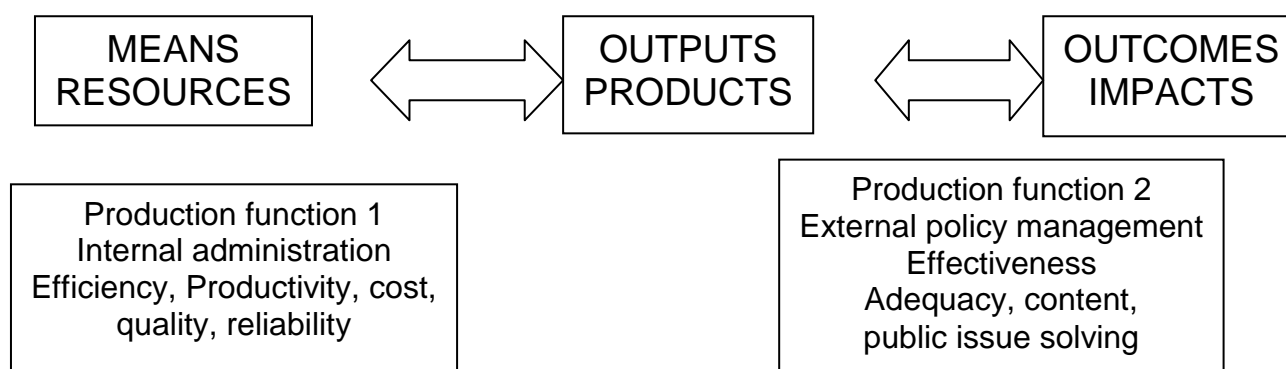
Analytically sharper approaches of publicness may be required. More than the legal status, it is the actual relationship to political governance and governmental authority that may matter.

Despite vanishing differences and the rise of a swollen middle (Hennart 1993), organizations that are public, whether they are profit or not for profit oriented, may be characterized by their exposure to the political arena. Some private firms such as those operating in public utilities, are more public than some state owned companies that in principle are public service agencies but in fact do operate as market driven organizations, such as some railroad or energy producers in the European Union. Barry Bozeman (1987) defines publicness as the fact that government more than market factors influences action-taking and contexts in which organizations operate, whatever their legal status is. Exposure to the political arena matters more or less according to circumstances. While such a criterion makes good sense, it nevertheless does not really help organizations studies to generate thick analysis.

An alternative approach of publicness assumes that public organizations are a specific type of social configuration driven by and accountable for two production functions, and not just for one, as it is the case for firms and voluntary associations:

- operational outputs. This function relates to inner efficiency, to the production of specific goods and services that can be easily identified and numbered;
- societal change outcomes. This production function handles the delivery of effectiveness. It deals with rather mid-term, indirect and less quantifiable effects.

TWO PRODUCTION FUNCTIONS



Such a perspective takes into consideration action as well as legitimacy attributes. It owes a lot to a normative and public management orientation. Nevertheless for analytic purposes it provides a rather new and fruitful grid to explore into depth.

Administration in general refers to the way resources or inputs such as money, personnel and raw components are linked to visible outputs or finished products such as the number of cars manufactured or the volume of oil refined. The purpose is either to minimize the resources used to achieve a certain amount of production or to maximize production for a given amount of resources allocated. Economists describe such a coupling as an internal production function. The goal to achieve by the hierarchy is efficiency. The tools available are techniques and procedures such as accounting, cost control, human relations, logistics, etc. The time horizon is conventionally defined and not a matter for debate. Budget cycles are annually grounded, productivity inside a plant is measured by conventional standards, etc.

The nature of efficiency remains a research question. Productivity, client satisfaction, costs are criteria among many others to consider. It also has been argued, quite wisely and well ahead of New Public Management, that efficiency as a normative reference remains too often success-oriented (Landau and Chisholm 1995). Other doctrines of efficiency are at work in public management such as failure avoidance. In this case reliability, and not optimality, provides their foundation. Organizational redundancies and overlaps of jurisdictions may downgrade microeconomic performance proxies and increase the annual cost structure. But whenever a major accident, catastrophe or unrest happens that is not recurrent and remains unpredictable, whether meteorological, technical or social, the system supplies enough slack and reliable sources of know-how to minimize the consequences.

Except for some minor legal differences (status of the employees, appropriation and accounting rules), public agencies face similar administrative contexts than those private firms acting on the market are dealing with. Inner management looks alike in both worlds. But, and this makes the whole difference, public sector organization administration has a second production function to take into account, that private organizations have not. This function is called effectiveness. It is not internal to the institution but external. It is embedded in a societal fabric of some sort. Therefore it is more complex to administer a public organization than a private one.

Effectiveness refers to the way specific outputs or finished products, goods and services, are causally linked to policy outcomes and societal impacts they are supposed to generate. These outcomes and impacts are of a special nature as compared with outputs and products. No consensual timeframe states when to make such assessments, how and with which indicators. The public organization has no monopoly to define them *a priori*. More or less volatile groupings express non convergent opinions about them, select those that make sense for them, judge, evaluate more or less spontaneously whether specific societal impacts are a success or a failure, and whether they may be attributed to a specific policy endorsed by a specific public institution.

Education offers a good illustration. Whether public or private, schools as organizations burn resources and deliver services that can be measured in exactly the same terms: how much does it cost to teach reading to a young kid, what is the level of reading to achieve after one year, etc. There is no basic reason why by definition efficiency should systematically be different between both sectors. But a private school is free to define by itself (its head, its board of owners, etc) its own *raison d'être*, the ends its outputs and its functioning have to serve: making money, building a dominant market share, acquiring reputation, etc. As long as it complies with constraints such as public regulations and the contract signed with the principal, it can change its location, reform its pedagogy, increase its fees, etc. If it considers these constraints to be too tight for the ultimate goal it had decided by its own to serve, it may exit the domain, stop delivering certain goods, close its doors or offer a different program to different clients, become a training school for secretaries or for hairdressers. Most if not all public schools cannot. They are not masters of their own fate. Neither are they mere functional suppliers. Their geographical location matters as much when not more than their cost structure and their productivity. They may be settled on purpose in specific areas to serve specific populations. They not only educate kids how to read, they also socialize them and their parents to a certain style of community life and values. The presence of a school offers upward mobility opportunities to social milieus that are deprived of them. In other terms, public schooling endorses a broader societal mission that comes on top of its narrow functional efficiency function.

To assess the level of publicness, it is less important to consider whether or not an organization is owned or controlled formally by the state and it becomes more relevant to check whether it has discretion to define its own criteria of success and its ultimate goals. Inside the same country publicly owned agencies may differ quite much. Some function as if they would be private firms, setting their own goals and criteria of efficiency, without being accountable for any effectiveness function. Others are accountable *de facto* for both production functions. They are supposed to be somehow efficient while being also

effective. How organizationally the balance between both production functions is achieved, and with which consequences, are questions still to open to further research.

As a concept publicness is characterized by four main properties:

- ownership of societal impacts
- policy mandates legitimized by governmental authority
- multiple and divergent indicators of success and failure
- no spontaneous self-evaluation.

A public organization manages a policy which ultimate goals are defined and assessed by third parties, some governmental authority when not a set of differentiated stakeholders, public and private.

Public organizations are submitted to policies which goals they do not legitimize by themselves. Third parties do, usually the political authorities that govern the domain. They pour money into such and such domain, appoint people, fund the acquisition of equipment, etc. Two classes of outcomes are expected to generate. Negatives are to be eliminated or have not to happen that otherwise would disrupt society – crime, poverty, fire protection, water and air pollution, etc. Positives should be supplied, outcomes should be provided to induce improvements or to satisfy aspirations that otherwise, if nothing would be done by the government and the state, would not be supplied by civil society spontaneously – cultural development and access to arts, local economic development, access to job markets, etc. A public policy is not just the policy of a public organization. Politics shape and governmental policies legitimize a set of collective norms and actions about societal change to which public enterprises are expected to conform. Exogenous reasons and achievements frame effectiveness. They provide the essence of a public enterprise.

Evidence shows that political authorities play a more or less important role. They may not always seem to be proactive, but their non-acts are acts that matter and have consequences. Impacts to achieve are most of the time not defined in details and *a priori*. Political rationality or electoral cycles may lead governmental authorities to avoid commitments about long term and quantitative goals. . Political executive and legislative bodies care more for symbolic impacts and immediate support from public opinion and less for actual consequences in the long run. Agencies may even be left by their own so that they substitute in a technocratic manner their own know how, routines and definition of the goals to reach. In certain circumstances more cynical motives may be at work. Governmental authorities pass new laws and make new policy announcements while being aware of the difficulty to get them enforced on the field. Such is the case for symbolic policies. Their real stake is to produce

support from public opinion, and not lasting impacts on daily practices. Their latent message sounds like “do not worry, we care about”. But, at the end, accountability and initiative remain attributes of the political arena.

Public organizations play a societal role that goes far beyond their technical function of providing goods and services. They shape society, polity and ecology, they construct and influence purposively their environments.

A public agency may have to maintain certain categories of roads in a specific geographic area. To do so it can deliver itself all the outputs that are part of its mandate. It may also subcontract their production to private suppliers. In any case the *raison d'être* of its internal production function or efficiency is not to expand its road maintenance market share or to deliver a profit that maximizes the satisfaction of its owners or principals. What really matters at the end is that traffic safety does not downgrade, that transportation fluidity increases, that the politicians who head the public jurisdiction do not get blamed by local constituencies.

In any cases such societal impacts are not obvious to define. Public organizations face a world in which ambiguity is the name of the game. How far the impacts or outcome are direct consequences of causes such as the outputs delivered by the agency remains not always easy to assess. On top of that, political rationality, which implies the possibility open to political policy makers not to be held responsible for their past decisions whatever their actual impacts have been, makes the environment of public organizations quite volatile and uncertain. Embedding public agencies socially and politically is a way to induce effectiveness. To a certain extent backward mapping and re-interpretation of rules are quite common practice at the level of so-called street bureaucrats (Elmore 1982).

Publicness implies that agencies are confronted with two kinds of knowledge sources. One is related to the structure of its formal organization. The other one is carried by the policies they are in charge of.

Organizations in general are social constructs aimed at achieving some collective reliability out of risky actors such as individuals and small groups. How to make different logics of actions compatible to produce a certain type of goods and services is perhaps the most fundamental question academic research addresses since many years. Key properties of an organization such as centralization of authority, asymmetric and linear relationships, specialization of tasks and jurisdictions, procedural as well as substantive decision rules design a structure of knowledge, a theory (Thoenig 1998). They anticipate consequences to be generated. They prescribe what will happen when specific acts are

produced, when such and such governmental interventions are made in a stated area and in certain manner. Knowledge is perfect when no fault occur, when the formal solutions for the operations to conduct are always correct. Organizations supply certainty and reliability.

Policies also are theories, but of a different nature. Any policy blends some normative with some factual premises. Death penalty is a judicial policy. Its *raison d'être* can be formulated according to two quite different premises. One is moral or ideological. The penalty may be legitimized as a form of societal duty, of ethical revenge. Those who have killed have to pay for their crime with their own death. Such values are set or shared *a priori*. They are not testable and open to verification. Another set of premises legitimizing death penalty are factual. Such is the case with deterrence. Future events are expected to differ from past ones. Potential killers shall be afraid to commit a crime of the same class. Consequences can be traced, tested empirically and evaluated later on.

Factual premises are hypotheses (Landau 1977). A policy proposes a set of acts and non-acts to alter some existing context or mode of conduct. It is intentional, as it expresses the will of a policy maker. It is designed to attain in the future some goals or outcomes by producing today some outputs. Policies are therefore describing or postulating in a more or less implicit manner three components; a desired state condition, a supposed present condition, a set of means to change the present condition in the future. They assert if-then linkages. Policies are supposed to control and direct future courses of action in a world that is uncertain and risky. The function of their empirical claims is to eliminate errors.

Facts suggest that errors are common and that dysfunctional phenomena are widely present. Two major sources exist.

A first one is linked to errors of the theory on which the policy is relying. The latter may be built on wrong effectiveness assumptions about social, economic and ecological phenomena. Wrong assumptions are made about the factual situation today and the probability to generate the future desired state. For instance death penalty does not deter killers. Policy makers ignore reality on which they intervene and have wrong representations of the conducts to change and the dynamics to mobilize for that purpose. More accurate use of scientific knowledge dealing with the specific policy domain – for instance criminology - may provide tools for better effectiveness.

A second one derives from dysfunctions in efficiency. Inner management may be poor, formal structures may not be adequate. Implementation is a key point. Governmental authorities rely massively on organizations to implement them.

Evidence consistently shows that this transfer is not easy to achieve in a smooth manner. It remains a source of risk and waste. Policy studies even suggest that up to two thirds of the failures originate because of what happens during the implementation or administration phase. Implementation, being achieved by organizations, is prone to routine and to biases. The formal organization as a source of error geometrically increases the number and intensity of errors. For instance discretionary behaviors of street level enforcers, when not repressed by their supervisors, may lead to failing policies. A law exists but it is not fully enforced. It is a consequence of a policy error as much as just a matter of administrative mismanagement. The specific organization governmental authorities ask to implement the policy does not take ownership and deliver.

Do in fact public organizations correct their errors? The addition of both production functions makes public organizations a very complicated context to manage. Inner dysfunctions may generate outer dysfunctions.

Rules and formal structures are solutions aimed at solving problems defined in advance, the different units inside the agency being expected to conform. At the same time the organization is supposed to produce and handle information about its environment and the impacts of its knowledge structure. Information means surprise, anomaly, a signal that something goes wrong about action taking and the knowledge structure itself. Evidence suggests that publicness hinders the use of errors as incentives to correct knowledge structure.

Like many private and not for profit organizations, public agencies usually show a high level of knowledge. The problem derives from the fact that the more an organization has knowledge the less it has information, the less it generates and handles errors as a lack of adequate knowledge and a piece of information. An error becomes a sin to avoid, a pathological state to hide, not an opportunity to learn, a signal to make sense of for future action taking. When error happens people are often punished while errors are not spontaneously corrected.

Unlike other classes of organizations, and because of their effectiveness production function, public agencies face another obstacle in correcting errors and using information. As mentioned above, and in a majority of cases, external impacts indicators are fuzzy and ideologically loaded, objectives are uncertain, time horizons are controversial and unstable, causal linkages between a specific policy and a specific set of outcomes are not linear and difficult to establish. Even rudimentary self-awareness is lacking.

Policy evaluation is neither spontaneously induced nor obvious to achieve. The idea to manage an evaluation of effectiveness is an ideal goal difficult to achieve, an utopia (Thoenig 2002). Evaluation and organization are somewhat

contradictory. Public agencies as organizations do not, most of the time, evaluate their own activities (Wildavsky 1979). They do not correct errors and surprises that are generated either by the action theory that its organizational structure implies or by the societal theory implicit in the policy it is mandated to implement. They rely instead on their knowledge to identify societal needs to serve and effective means to deliver them. Efficiency and effectiveness are relevant as long as their criteria and achievements are in line with the knowledge structure. If not they make not much sense. The public organization prefers to discard them as action drivers. Policies are basically self-perpetuating.

3. From organization to organizing and organized

Theoretical and conceptual frameworks are not by themselves ends. They provide means. They are useful as tools to explain certain problems, and obstacles to understand others. Publicness as defined above offers a heuristically fruitful way to explore the characteristics of public action and the way public organizations contribute to it.

Studies of public organizations gain a lot from maintaining close contact with policy analysis. They improve *Verstehen* approaches of what governmental authorities do and the public issues that are addressed. Bringing policymaking and politics back in enables academic research to deal with content, and not to focus only on process. It also widens the picture. Daily routines, formal structures and inner functioning of agencies are also parts of a more global action arena called policy-making.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s several public administration scholars left organizational sociology *stricto sensu* and joined political sociology or science, but without dropping their research interest for governmental agencies and publicness as such, on the contrary. Pioneering studies in Europe (Mayntz 1979; Dupuy and Thoenig 1979) as well as in the USA (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973; Bendor 1985; Chisholm 1989). Fruitful convergencies between policy studies and organizational reasoning derived from the study of constitutive policies such as intergovernmental studies and decentralization of territorial affairs (Rhodes 1982; Thoenig 2005). Studying policies is a stimulating way to explore organizations with different lenses or from a different angle.

One major contribution to publicness study made possible by an action perspective is empirical.

In most policy sectors problems are addressed and handled by more than one formal agency. In other terms what happens in one sector is the consequence of what many policies and public bureaucracies do, whether intentionally or not. Unemployment is the consequence of multiple governmental acts and non-acts, from locating low income housing to fiscal incentives and training programs. Several policy sectors and agencies combine to influence its rate and structure. More generally a specific policy induces consequences and impacts not only for the specific problem it is designed for, but also for other problems and the way other policies operate and impact society. Therefore cases are quite exceptional when a specific formal organization exerts a full monopoly and exclusive ownership on a policy jurisdiction.

Observation suggests on and on that public agencies are not working in a autarkic manner. Their acts and non-acts are not the only ones that matter to solve a specific issue carried by the governmental agenda. Many organizations with another legal status – voluntary organizations, private firms, charities, etc – intervene, formally or informally, as subcontractors, as policy implementers, as problem solvers, etc. Political science defines such sets by metaphors and terms such as policy arenas or communities. Local economic development, social welfare, health, crime and law, public transportation, are just a few policy areas among many that see coalitions at work. The lesson is that public issues and their treatment should not be considered in a statocentric manner. Public policies are collective problems, involving many institutions and organizations. Public agencies and the state are just one among many actors, sometimes much more powerful and relevant than others, sometimes much less.

These observations imply lasting consequences for organizations studies. A state of the art survey of literature identifies main categories of public organizations (Thoenig 1997). The criterion used is the degree to which inner functioning is impermeable or sensitive to outer dynamics and factors. Four types may be listed:

- an inward-orientated type of functioning. It cuts itself from its environment.
- an environment sensitive type. It takes into account outside stakes, groups and issues by showing local flexibility capacities or by institutionalizing cooptation processes, whether formally or informally.
- an outward-driven type of functioning. Public organizations are highly dependant from outside forces such as professions or from outside relevant resources such as information. Centrifugal dynamics matter more than their authority hierarchy.
- an inter-organizational system embedded type of organizational functioning. The formal organization does not provide the backbone of its

integration. It is regulated by some broader and rather stable network or collective action system of which it is part.

Formal organizations are not the only way to fulfill certain outcomes. Other social configurations and processes such as organizing and organized do offer alternative solutions. Making different logics of action compatible in a lasting way and without major difficulties can be achieved otherwise than by a hierarchy of authority principle. Policy adjustments and cooperation between separate when not rhetorically antagonistic public agencies and private operators may even be easier to induce without using formal coordination structures across them. Mixing policy analysis and organization analysis leads to identify and analyze other forms of social voluntary cooperation: informal cooptation, cross-regulation, redundancy, collective action, networks, etc. Public organization scholars were to some extent ahead of private firms. It is later in the 1980s that the latter gave birth to attention given to similar mechanisms linking operators acting on economic markets such as joint ventures, strategic alliances, etc.

Such a research program started in the late 1970s. Two key social processes, widely ignored or under-estimated, were brought to light by social sciences: organizing, the organized.

Organizing refers to the way separate actors linked by some form of interdependencies build a pattern allowing recurrent behavior and action certainty. Which normative schemes and behavioral processes are set up and diffused? How and why are action taking and division of work quasi-negotiated? (Dupuy and Thoenig 1979).

Organized refers to the way quasi-organized social configurations grow and evolve that are not coordinated by one center, but by a multi-centric core. How do shared social norms – rules on rules, or secondary rules (Reynaud 1989) – emerge and get constructed that shape appropriate ways to behave and to design operating rules – or primary rules - emerge? What integrative mechanisms are at work such as indoctrination, domination, regulation or self-interest based opportunism? How is social integration achieved when no clear-cut limits define the boundaries, the limits memberships, when relationships between the various parts are not transitive and when asymmetry between levels is very low? What are the performance abilities of such and such types of organized set up?

These issues had been ignored by organization studies for many years. Basically focused on organizations as formal forms of human activity cooperation, they took for granted that to explain social phenomena inside a public agency, it was sufficient to observe what was happening inside its legal or formal limits, in

some cases by adding the users as a source of observation. A few pioneering studies had suggested that ignoring the wider action set may be a constraint for the advancement of knowledge in organization studies. They identified social constructs such as grass roots cooptation of local elites and institutionalization (Selznick 1949) or exchange of favors between field agencies and local politicians (Crozier and Thoenig 1976). Support and conflict with civil society lobbies and social milieus were analyzed as organizational vectors for public sector agencies. Policemen, social workers, tax collectors, just to mention a few, have a public service mission enforce detailed rules and codified procedures. Their success or their failure depends nevertheless to a degree that may not be irrelevant from access to and support from local resources provided by outsiders: to get intelligence, to identify users, to get help from relays and allies, etc. Despite such exciting findings public organization studies surprisingly did not really switch to other research designs until policies and quasi organized action systems would open up a different approach.

A corollary of such a breakthrough is methodological. If it is true that formally autonomous organizations may depend from others when handling a certain problem or implementing a certain policy, then it implies that it is such a specific problem or policy that structures a form of organized structure and organizing activity between a set of actors, that generates this set and provides interdependence for cooperation. In other words the content and the context of a problem or a policy design inter-organizational types of social configurations. Usually rather implicit, they nevertheless may be quite well established, durable, etc. One public agency therefore may be part of many such inter-organizational settings. Action and order requirements are quite complex to address in a organized manner, at least more than classic organization sociology inspired by Max Weber's formal model had thought of. Bureaucratization tells only one part of the story in public sector and public action.

Further research is still needed to explore in a more systematic way a wide variety of questions. Three may be worth mentioning.

Are specific kinds of organizational configurations coupled with specific policy tools such as monies, rules or institution building? Various typologies are available that classify policies according to criteria such as the degree of coercion they exert on the groups and individuals whose practices and statuses they want to modify (Salisbury 1968) or the toolkit governmental authorities select for policy-making (Hood 1983). More systematic and comparative studies would be welcome that would verify whether such a co-variation do occur. Pioneering research projects undertaken, for instance, by Renate Mayntz and her associates on implementation processes in Germany have paved the way (Marin and Mayntz 1991). Much more evidence would be welcomed.

Another challenge for knowledge questions the dissociation between power and authority and its consequences. Is it true that horizontal negotiation dynamics facilitate efficiency and effectiveness much more than hierarchical authority? Do control and command processes really face dramatic difficulties to impose their schemes to peripheries that are far from being passive, as it seems to be the case for instance for issues and sectors like territorial decentralization (Thoenig 2005) or urban government (Le Galès 1998)? If this is so, what are the implications for organizational values such as the pursuit of general interest and for the content of professional skills inside public agencies? Are administrative bureaucratization and narrow action codification mere pathological obstacles or are they necessary counterparts to make participative democracy work?

A last but not least new frontier relates to cognitions, their nature, their function. For many years organizational sociologists studying public agencies have ignored such a facet. Policy evaluation research has given more attention to it. Stakeholders such as political decision makers and citizens express normative judgments and mobilize prejudices when considering that a policy fails or succeeds. State agencies protect themselves from centrifugal forces and particularistic requests emanating from society and polity by building barriers such as professional norms or moral identity references such as the general interest. The nature of such phenomena is clearly cognitive. Exploring them implies the observation of criteria in act or at work, and not just a collection of discourses or a set of so-called cognitive maps. Shared cognitions or common languages for action are neither argumentation nor rhetorical artifacts. They also cannot be reduced just to local expressions of some exogenous and global phenomena such as class ideologies or professional cultures. They induce empirical consequences. And they are generated by organized settings. Some progress has been made in the last years about cognitions in firms (Michaud and Thoenig 2003). Is it fair to say that public organization studies have still some way to go in this respect?

Time has come to reconsider the public sector and its organizations as a problem to be studied empirically, with depth and rigor, with creativity and in an agnostic way. Scholars have learned that, to a large extent, notions like the state and the public administration are analytically poor or disappointing. They cover highly differentiated realities. Their boundaries keep fluctuating. Identical criticisms could apply to civil society as a notion. Public organization researchers also realize that New Public Management was a parenthesis, that provided bread and butter for many of them, in terms of publications and public subsidies, that was polemical –which may be a positive thing - but did not generate many conceptual breakthroughs based on rich empirical evidence – not to discover new phenomena is not ideal.

The relevance of publicness should be tested, less for its own sake than as an analytic tool. Its added value is worth considering as long as it contributes to the advancement of general organization, organizing and organized theory, but also to the understanding of politics and policies in multi-level societies.

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